

Social Media as a Catalyst for the Spread of Misinformation in Uzbekistan: Growing Media Literacy

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Abstract

In Uzbekistan, internet access is growing so fast that the access to information people once had is being modified and evolving even faster, meaning people are receiving more false narratives. Social Media is now the main source of news where people obtain information, opening a pathway for unscrutinized content to fly to the world and the public. The accessibility and convenience of digital platforms are even more hallmarks of that complexity where separating truth from falsehood has become difficult for citizens when confronted with plenty of narratives. When it comes to addressing false information, these obstacles demonstrate the necessity of strengthening fact-checking processes and adding media literacy education to any and all learning, training and practices. These capacities are also essential to providing safe digital engagement and the ability of people to critique the information they have obtained.

Keywords

Social media and misinformation, Fake news in digital platforms, Media literacy in Uzbekistan, Fact-checking practices, Digital citizenship education, Online news consumption habits, Internet access and information authenticity, Telegram as a news source, Instagram and misinformation spread, COVID-19 infodemic in Uzbekistan.

Introduction

Since the rapid development of the internet in Uzbekistan, public and media awareness of misinformation has increased, mainly due to low media literacy skills and the lack of robust fact-checking processes of the general public. By 2023, around 21 million people were internet users, meaning that nearly two-thirds of the population was regularly exposed to online information; in most cases those contacts stemmed from the fact that they relied on Telegram, Instagram and Facebook as their primary source of news or communication. These platforms

have been integral to the digitalization of the nation, but they also opened a platform for individuals to easily share misinformation or misleading content and get widely disseminated amongst the citizens. Furthering this issue is the move from printed newspapers to virtual content, because it is now easier to find "*fake news*" that is unverified while online than it is to find established and certified content in print. Evidence suggests that many Uzbeks encounter false information daily, which leads to their inability to distinguish fact from fiction, especially during a time of dynamic change in a digital environment. This challenge became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, where an International Republican Institute survey revealed that 75% of people had viewed false or misleading information about the pandemic. Based on the facts above, tackling misinformation in Uzbekistan includes not only developing fact-checking systems but also integrating media literacy into education and daily life, so that citizens can engage in ethical digital citizenship and analyzing the digital data, which they regularly consume.

Background

Misinformation has recently been in the spotlight of the media more than ever before in Uzbekistan. At the heart of this problem is first of all the lack of good media literacy and inability to assess the authenticity [1]. As of 2023, nearly 21 million people living in Uzbekistan use the internet [3]. And the majority of individuals use Telegram, Instagram and Facebook as part of their daily lives [2]. Although it contributes to the growth of digitalization in the country, it boosts the rate of misinformation pervading amongst citizens. As the conventional method of getting aware about the news has changed its structure from paper to screen, making people fall into the trap of those "*fake news*" has become far easier than ever before [4]. A Westminster Foundation for Democracy report from 2021 found that many people in Uzbekistan regularly come into contact with misinformation, especially in a social media and messaging context. With few reliable fact-checking systems available, often unverified news circulates more freely meaning people find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between what is fact and what is fiction.

The problem of "*fake news*" became far more ubiquitous during the COVID 19 so that most of the people, at the time, fell victim to fake news deliberately spread in the media. A 2020 survey by the International Republican Institute (IRI) revealed that In Uzbekistan, 75% of respondents reported that they had seen false or misleading information about COVID-19 on social media [5]. Another study conducted by the Media Development Center found that 45% of people found it difficult to distinguish between real and fake news, suggesting the need for more media literacy [4]. To combat misinformation in reliable ways, the first step is always media literacy (media proficiency), which is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce content in a variety of media forms. In Uzbekistan, the importance of teaching critical thinking skills about the media we consume is amplified, given that internet access is growing at a far quicker rate than programs to teach those skills. In a 2022 report from UNESCO, the authors pointed out that while some initiatives and programs have emerged in including media literacy in schools' curricula, the impact is limited. There is still much work left to do to ensure that we put the

building blocks in place for future generations to have the skills they need to thrive in this era of information overload [6].

Results and Findings

To obtain much clearer findings, an online survey was conducted, in which volunteers were surveyed on eight different questions related to media literacy and what kind of applications they use to become aware of the news where “*misinformation and fake news*” could exist. The online survey was conducted via Google Form, and random internet users in Uzbekistan (the control group consisting of sixty volunteers that filled up the survey) were asked to honestly fill it up based on their personal experience. The results gained from the experiment show that:

Which social media platform do you most often rely on for news and information?
60 responses

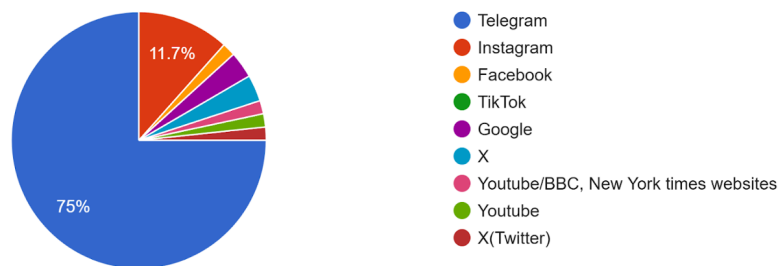


Figure 1.1. The rate of app usage for accessing news.

Which platform do you think is the one, in which most of the fake news and misinformation is spread?
60 responses

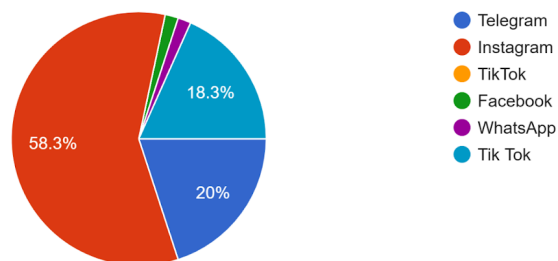


Figure 1.2. The rate of Misinformation distribution across platforms perceived by the respondents.

As it is displayed on Figure 1.1 above, the majority of internet users living in Uzbekistan mainly use Telegram to consume news and information they need, with an exact proportion of 75% of users going for Telegram, 11.7% choosing Instagram and the remaining 13.3 percent for other media platforms (Facebook, TikTok, Google, X, YouTube and more). In turn, it becomes obvious that Uzbekistan is largely dependent on Telegram for gaining a huge part of daily news and information so that it could be possibly predicted that most of misinformation spreading might happen in this sphere. Surprisingly, it is clear from Figure 1.2 that, however, just over half of the respondents in our survey perceive it as Instagram where a considerable proportion of misleading and fraudulent content is found on social media platforms, with Telegram and TikTok accounting for 20% and 18.3%, respectively [7]. Consequently, it is apparent from these views that Instagram has just been the centre for spreading rumors and misinformation with ease in Uzbekistan. This calls for further research into doing the fact-checking of each news and information seen on those media platforms, showing the media literacy rate in Uzbekistan.

When you see news on social media, how often do you check its source before believing or sharing it?
60 responses

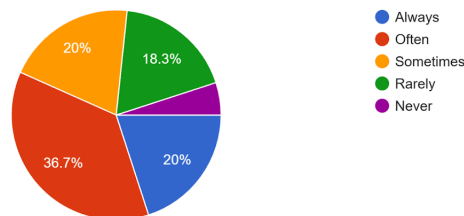


Figure 1.3. The rate of respondents who usually do the fact-checking.

As represented on Figure 1.3, just over 36 percent of the survey participants mentioned that they “Often” fact-check the materials they have seen on the media online, and the proportion of respondents who answered ‘Always’ and those who answered ‘Sometimes’ was identical, each accounting for 20% [7]. From these all combined, it can be concluded that almost half of the users of those platforms fact-check the things to ensure that they are legit, with the rest even not looking at the reliability of that information. In this case, it means that 10 out of 20 internet users do not insist on the truthfulness of the information they see. When respondents were

How confident are you in your ability to recognize misinformation or fake news online?
60 responses

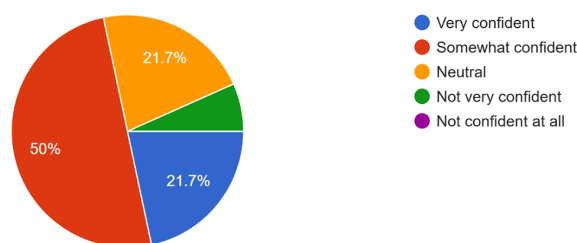


Figure 1.4. The rate of people’s ability to distinguish misinformation

asked to rate their capability to distinguish true information from “*misinformation and fake news*”, precisely half of them told that they are “Somewhat confident”, with answers “Very confident” and “Neutral” reaching up to the same 21.7 percent each and the remaining for those who said “Not very confident” [7].

Do you think schools and universities in Uzbekistan should include media literacy in their curriculum?
60 responses

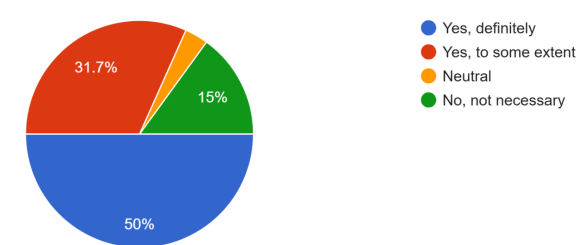


Figure 1.5. The percentage of people who said media literacy in schools is important.

This condition requires nearly all the users to be much more media-savvy to avoid being misled on the internet, in turn. The question of whether media-literacy should be prioritized in school curriculum was also asked from the respondents in our survey, and accurately 50% percent of them told “Yes, definitely” as it can be seen on Figure 1.5, meaning that it needs to be included in the school curriculum to grow media literacy from a young age and to make everyone aware of potential fraud in the media [7]. And as a workaround for this widespread problem, they rated some of the given solutions that could help to handle the problem as seen on Figure 1.6.

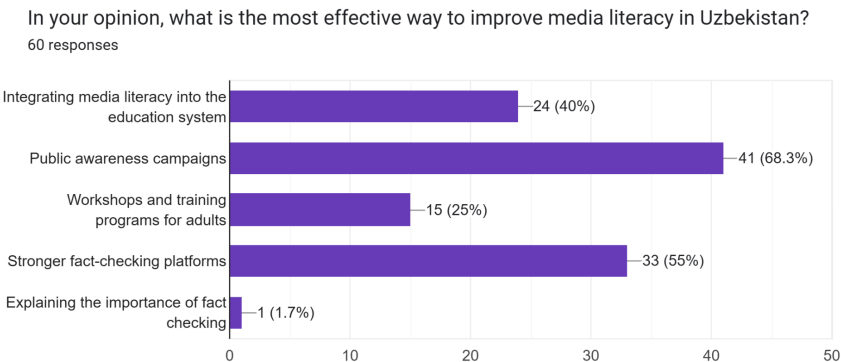


Figure 1.6. The rate of the most effective strategies for enhancing media literacy.

According to the survey findings on Figure 1.6, survey respondents answered "public awareness campaigns" (68.3%), "more robust verification platforms" (55%) and "institutionalizing media literacy" (40%) in schools, displayed the most support for the three community-level solutions resulting in increased media literacy in Uzbekistan. In contrast, respondents selected "adult workshops" (25%) and simply educating the community to fact-checking (1.7%) as lesser priorities providing evidence of the variables that indicate support for large public awareness campaigns, trustworthy verification platforms and institutionalizing

media literacy as the most preferred solutions. The results suggest in essence the need for media literacy to improve in Uzbekistan needs a multi-faceted approach in order enhance media literacy incorporating public engagement, technological laboratory support, and education.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that any effort to enhance media literacy in Uzbekistan must involve a holistic plan that creates immediate awareness through campaigns and fact-checking platforms, while also ensuring long-term sustainability through a focus on education.

Discussion

Reading the results of this study publically demonstrates the way social media in some ways acts as a gift to the people of Uzbekistan, and in other ways a burden. Having easy access to news via platforms such as Telegram and Instagram is a good thing, but at the same time creates a landscape where misinformation can thrive. What is perhaps most notable is that while a high number of people use Telegram to find news, most individuals see Instagram as the No.1 location for false and misleading content. This demonstrates a crucial gap in our study participants' understanding of where they consume information, and where they feel misinformation lives, demonstrating often a lack of confidence in the reliability of their digital environments themselves. Another important signal is the fact-checking behavior of respondents. While some people "Often" or "Always" try to verify the information they see, there is an important number of individuals who do not even bother and do not seek verification, making themselves more susceptible to incorrect narratives. This is not surprising given that fact-checking is effortful and requires a skill set, and given that we do not teach people about media literacy I suspect that they will not develop the habit to start. It quickly became evident that a part of addressing misinformation is simply providing the people the capability to stop, reflect, and critically appraise what they see online is just as important if Uzbekistan is to move toward a more informed society. These responses about media literacy in schools capture this sentiment. Fifty percent of respondents view media literacy as a curricular necessity which demonstrates there is a higher awareness level within citizens that younger people must learn how to navigate a complex information ecosystem. This is a positive outcome. It demonstrates that they not only care about the present but also recognize their responsibility for the future. In terms of the modes of informing that respondents felt were most effective, a few patterns emerged. Most people saw large-scale awareness raising campaigns, better fact checking systems, and educational reform as the highest priorities. This tells us that citizens are starting to understand that there is not one solution to the problem, it is about coming together and making multi-layered approaches work. Awareness campaigns can provide immediate protection but structural changes in education and technology will be needed for people to continue to be actively resistant to misinformation. This research does have its limitations. It surveyed a relatively small sample size, and as the data mainly reflects the people who are active on the web, it does not fully represent the voices from people with limited access to the internet or differing socio-economic background from our samples. Regardless, what we can

take from the findings is valuable food-for-thought about how ordinary citizens experience and navigate misinformation on social media.

Ultimately, it is important to note that when we discuss misinformation in Uzbekistan we are not just discussing a technical problem or a topic for academic study. The issue of misinformation evokes larger questions about trust, accountability, and the very well-being of a society where citizens are increasingly living in digital space. The consequence of ongoing and escalating misinformation extends well beyond the individual and is corrosive to our collective social existence, including health, education, governance, and social cohesion. However, importantly, this project also illustrates, and at least on a basic level, the people themselves already see the danger and implicitly demand action. That action is now squarely in the hands of educators, legislatures, and media to respond to that demand and create a safer and more literate digital space for all.

Conclusion

These findings show that social media, while providing citizens in Uzbekistan with immediate news access, is also one of the primary vehicles for disseminating misinformation. Social media platforms such as Telegram and Instagram serve as both a site of news and a site of misinformation. The survey indicated that many respondents do not have dependable habits of fact checking. There was some awareness from respondents of the risk of being taken in by false narratives, though there was a lack of confidence in their ability to distinguish fact from fantasy. Half of the respondents identified the lack of media literacy occurring in school demonstrating an awareness of the problem and the interest in tackling it as a long term urgent solution. In summary, the battle against misinformation in Uzbekistan must be considered in three dimensions; awareness campaigns for urgency, dependable verification systems for digital trust, and educational reform for a long term solution. Furthermore, the fact that misinformation necessitates us to understand it is not simply a technical problem but a societal problem, is also a discussion that defines citizenship and the possibility of cohesion.

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